Shifting the Focus to the Student: The ExcEL Attitude
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Talking about English learners as a population masks the tremendous diversity of students falling under this classification, so it should come as no surprise that any single program or approach aimed at this population cannot be successful, no matter how carefully crafted. EL students require unique educational options that match their own interests, goals, and purposes for school.

These days, when the words "always" or "never" are used in a school policy context, it is a clear indicator that we are off-course. A study by the American Institutes of Research (2010) identified practices that fostered college readiness for EL students, finding that personalization and an environment where the unique needs of each student are known to be key to the learning achievements of ELs. In addition, they noted the involvement of families, communities, and postsecondary institutions as important components for success. Yet we frequently allow stringent, unyielding policies and guidelines to determine the courses and services students receive, regardless of their individual needs and aspirations.

To provide an alternative to this situation, two New York State school districts, Tarrytown and Ossining, are partnering with UCLA's Center X to implement a multi-year program aimed at creating expanded and personalized learning opportunities for students in middle and high school who do not speak English as their first language. Known as Project ExcEL, or Excellence for English Learners, the program combines evidence-based strategies for classroom teaching with support provided by community partners. Elements of ExcEL are being replicated in additional NYS districts this year.

The work of Project ExcEL is to actively and intentionally shift the learning process to the student. Teams of teachers work together to discuss and tier EL students—proactively addressing urgent and immediate needs as well as improving pedagogical and other supports for all students. Through established collaborative partnerships, academic, social, and emotional supports are available for students and their families as needed. Barriers to engagement and success are identified and addressed. Discussion at ExcEL team meetings consistently revolves around the question, "What can we do to help *this* student succeed?"

A simple but fundamental shift underlies the developing success of the approach. ExcEL is an *attitude* more than a *program*—not a prescribed set of practices or strategies, but instead an approach that allows educators the time and structures to use their own expertise to address the individual challenges facing their students. A deep understanding of the strengths, needs, and aspirations of each student is established and flexible programming is designed to meet their needs.

As an example of why such an approach is needed, a teacher-led discussion on EL students in a comprehensive NYS high school surfaced the following information:

Partway into the second marking period, the number of students assigned to "ENL Labs" was doubled by adding all ENL students (at any level of proficiency) to this class designed as a small, supportive workspace for entering and emerging students only. This was a reaction to a misunderstanding of the guidelines for EL students, and done without teacher or student consultation.

Sound familiar? Both the teachers and students know this classification process is a mistake, yet feel powerless to correct it. The end result is students who require this intensive support will not receive it, and are thus likely to be unable to participate in grade-level academics and electives.

In contrast, ExcEL team members meet every few weeks to discuss each student's progress and needs and to collaboratively explore ways to improve their own pedagogy. Students are monitored on a simple spreadsheet that is only for the team's use and reference; for ease of use, they are color-coded as part of the discussion, with notes included to help track background information and actions to be taken in line with the student's home language and English level development (ELD) level (Table 1).

Table 1. Tracking of Student Progress and Recommendations in the ExcEL Program

Grade	Home Language/ ELD Level	Notes
8	Spanish/Transitioning	Has a 504, receiving SPED services since K; needs a better ENL placement (not making progress).
6	Spanish/Expanding	On level in math, not on level in ELA. Needs to push herself; closer teacher monitoring. Parent conference?
6	Punjabi/Expanding	Not proficient on quarterlies; concern about progress. She has poor work habits. Monitor.
7	Spanish/Expanding	Works very hard, very motivated. Doing great; continue to monitor and challenge.
7	Spanish/Emerging	Very low; struggles with work in English and Spanish. Not making progress. Refer to RTI team to see if can be scheduled into AIS services.

ExcEL schools have options to secure support for struggling students and their families. In many cases, such assistance is made possible by collaborations with local community partners; for example, Latino U College Access and Westchester Community College provide many services at the schools and within the community to ensure success. A critical element of this success is the connection between the teacher conversations and these supports.

ExcEL schools are developing flexible programming options that are working for students. Ossining High School, for example, is experiencing an influx of older immigrant students, including many who have experienced significant trauma and interrupted schooling prior to their arrival. Based on a clear understanding of the needs of individual students *and* their personal goals for education, the school has added an emergent literacy program designed to prepare students for success and full entry into the mainstream high school experience and a Spanish language GED program. Both programs are integrated into the school day, allowing students in either program to participate in the broader enrichment, athletic, and social high school activities. In this school and many others, the ExcEL attitude continues to drive the creation of flexible, responsive programming approaches to meet the unique needs of each student.

References

American Institutes of Research (2010). *Approaches to promoting college readiness for English learners.* Washington, DC: Author.

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